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ABSTRACT

The early education policy of the National Party government in New Zealand is based on the Parents As First Teachers (PAFT) approach and the New Parents as Teachers project, which originated in the United States in Missouri. It is difficult to assess this project, which is not well-documented. The PAFT policy that parents should be home with children recalls the post-World War II political rhetoric about how women should stay home because separation of mother and child is unhealthy for children. Contrary to the National Party's belief, sociologists have found that education as intervention makes little difference in children's life chances. National also seems to have overlooked the question of whether home visits by professionals is a good idea. Research indicates that parents are self-conscious about such visits and find them to be quite threatening. Before policy implementations are made, the Missouri project needs to be thoroughly examined and debated by education specialists and parents. References are included. (BC)

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YET TO MAKE THE GRADE:

NEW ZEALAND NATIONAL GOVERNMENT'S EARLY EDUCATION POLICY

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National's view of how early education should be carried out in New Zealand is of deep concern to people in the field, going by their responses to Dr Lockwood Smith's speeches at recent early childhood conferences and meetings.

As we've seen with the implementation of the Labour Government's "Before Five" policy, there can be many glitches along the way to introducing change even when there is wide consultation.

National did not, however, seek the views of those involved in providing early education and parent support services when developing its policy. It has not yet consulted widely to check on the acceptability and feasibility of its proposal for changing the emphasis on how early education is carried out.

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The "Parents As First Teachers" approach, advocated by National, originated in Missouri, U.S.A.

The Missouri model, called the New Parents as Teachers project has not been well documented.

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It is hard to make an independent assessment of it since only one article seems to have been published in an academic journal and a commissioned executive evaluation report suffers from the appearance of being tailor-written to convince its American sponsors and politicians of its value.

The theoretical approach, methods used, and conclusions drawn by the researchers on this project are highly questionable.

Standardized tests are used as measures of child development. Amongst educational researchers and early childhood professionals in New Zealand there is a general abhorrence of IQ and developmental testing for young children, particularly due to the difficuly of ensuring the accuracy of results and the problem of knowing whether what the tests are measuring is a child's "intelligence" or "language" development.

According to National's policy parents are not considered ***the experts*** on their own children and yet they have ***the responsibility*** for how their children "turn out".

Under the scheme parent-educators would talk with parents in their own homes and small groups about child-rearing, and provide guidance on how best to promote child development.

But, if parents are given more knowledge about parenting and child development, they would likely come to see themselves in more of a teaching or "expert" role than a parenting one. This seems to be an undermining of the parents' own knowledge, skills, and intuition on how best to help their under-three-year-old learn and grow. They would also be likely to worry that they were not doing enough, because as recipients of "expert" knowledge they would never come to know as much as the real paid experts.

The message to parents implicit in the 'Parents As (their children's) First (and most important) Teachers' policy is that they should always be with their children; that placement of a child aged under 3 in an early childhood centre, or in the care of other adults, could harm their development. This has similarities to the post-world-war-two political rhetoric that "a woman's place is in the home", based on a belief that mother-child separation is not healthy for children.

By parents taking on the education of their under-three-year-olds, the PAFT policy suggests that children would be given an equal footing when they enter the school system, regardless of individual differences in home background. The National party seems to believe it would help to overcome educational inequity by breaking the cycle of disadvantage some families experience.

However, sociologists of education have found the "cultural capital" (family and socio-economic characteristics) which children arrive at school with is predictive of their success at school and occupational mobility. They report that education as an 'intervention' does not tend to make much of a difference in the long-term, to children's life chances.

Children are not malleable lumps to be molded and shaped by their parents. Children do contribute to their own development. Other members of children's families, the people children come into contact with, and the community and society children live in, all have an impact on their development.

Early increases in children's I.Q. scores and developmental abilities can wash out without continued support. Developmental gains made at the age of one to four are not necessarily permanent or irreversible. National does not seem to have a clear proposal on whether there would be any follow-up, or what form early education after a child turns three, would take.

Whether it is better to focus early education programmes on parents or on children is a question for which there are no clear answers. But the research evidence does demonstrate that parent-focused programmes are no more effective than those that are centred on the child.

A practical issue which seems to have also been overlooked in National's policy is whether private home-visits as a means of providing early education is a good idea.

It seems that parents in New Zealand generally find visits from outside professionals to be quite threatening. Margery Renwick, in her research on teachers and parents in kindergartens, reports that parents can be self-conscious about home-visits. Teachers are also tending to carry out fewer home-visits than in the past because of an increasing awareness of cultural protocol. For example, with some Pacific Island people it would only be appropriate for female married teachers to make home-visits if accompanied by their husbands.

Before any firm decisions are made on the implementation or otherwise of this policy, the findings of the Missouri project need thorough examination.

It's strengths and weaknesses need to be clearly identified and debated by policy analysts, early education specialists, early education providers and, of course, parents themselves. Modifications may be recommended or alternatively it may be decided that the policy goes to to the paper shredder.

Adapting it now would be too big a step to take on the evidence we have so far. We owe it to our kids to do more homework before we make up our minds.

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